A Constructivist Approach to a Rising China

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The rise of China in the twenty-first century marks the end of unipolarity. The United States must meet the challenge of a resurgent China while maintaining its own status in the international system. It is in the United States’ best interest to pursue a strategy that avoids violence with China, while maintaining US hegemony in the western hemisphere and status as a superpower. To accomplish this, the United States has two imperative tasks: it must accept the end of unipolarity, and it must start using constitutive power to foster a rising China that behaves in accordance with internationally established norms. Alternatively, the sole option for the United States to maintain hegemony is an offensive realist strategy where the US competes with China across all domains. Pursuing this option would be a mistake. Given China’s strong nationalism, rising economic power, and regional interests, an offensive realist strategy will exacerbate Chinese security concerns and likely lead to armed conflict. However, if the US can accept the peaceful rise of China and maintain its superpower status, there exists the potential for an agreeable bipolar, or multipolar world. This article uses a constructivist lens to explore existing strategic narratives about China and demonstrates how a hybrid grand strategy of cooperative security and selective engagement presents a path for a peaceful rise of China without compromising America’s core interests in Asia, US regional hegemony, or the United States’ status as a superpower.

Constructivism seeks to understand the establishment of norms in international relations.1 Human societies construct appropriate behavior from the stories that they accept and propagate; ideas of power and influence emerge from these stories. This social construct generates a common knowledge shared among people.2 Common knowledge in the international arena, however, is not an egalitarian process. The more powerful states in the system have significant constitutive power; that is, they can shape, to a degree, international norms according to their own values.3 Therefore, in the international political system, the more dominant states influence how states view themselves, how states view other states, and how states desire other states to view themselves. If a state views a rising power as a revisionist threat, and reacts with an offensive realist strategy, conflict is almost certain between the two states. Likewise, if states view other states as open to
diplomatic dialogue, then the states are more likely to arrive at a diplomatic solution. Finally, a core aspect of the constructivist framework is that states cultivate a favored identity that puts forth an idealized vision of themselves not just domestically, but internationally; states form strong conceptions of their proper and rightful role internationally. When a state’s internal vision of itself does not match other states’ perceptions of it, and especially when the international community rejects a state’s desired identity, this creates considerable tension in the international community that can ultimately manifest as real conflict. 4

China is an ancient civilization with 3,500 years of written history, longer than that of any other modern state. In a speech to the Communist Party, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated, “with a history of more than 5,000 years, our nation created a splendid civilization, made remarkable contributions to mankind, and became one of the world’s greatest nations.”5 The Chinese do not view themselves as a rising power; rather, the Chinese identity is that of a great power that is simply reclaiming what is rightfully theirs.6 China’s desired identity is important to the United States for two key reasons: first, China’s growing material capability is making it a formidable military power and, second, as China’s economic base grows, so does its constitutive power.

With an understanding of China’s perceived self-identity, America must codify its objectives for a resurgent China. Some scholars see Xi’s China as analogous to Wilhelm I’s Germany.7 Michelle Murrey is one example of a recently published author who has made the comparison between World War I-era Germany and modern China. Murray argues that Germany pursued a navy before WWI not for security reasons, but because they viewed it as their best method to achieve the status of a great power. When Germany realized they could not win a naval arms race with Great Britain, they continued to pursue a large navy to solidify the desired German identity as a great power. Murry continues this analogy comparing the German naval buildup with modern China, who is also pursuing a blue water navy capability.8 More importantly, China is building its space power. In a 2021 context, space power offers China a more advantageous avenue to international prestige than attempting to match US naval supremacy. China’s pursuit of space power also has the potential to start an arms race with the United States.

While the analogy between Wilhelm I’s Germany and China has merit, it also creates a potentially dangerous narrative that US discourse constructs as representing factual reality. By establishing a narrative that China is analogous to pre-WWI Germany, America is propagating and normalizing the idea of a US-Sino conflict. Therefore, the United States is at a decision point with China. If America continues its current narrative, it may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Alternatively,
America can use its powerful constitutive influence to start promoting a new narrative.⁹

Instead of maintaining a strategy of liberal hegemony to reclaim a unipolar system or pursuing strategic restraint, by retrenching from the region and allowing Chinese hegemony, the United States should pursue a strategy that combines cooperative security and selective engagement.¹⁰ Cooperative security is intrinsic to the United States. Since 1945, America has built a robust network of alliances and international organizations. These alliances and institutions provide the United States many benefits, one of which is a strong constitutive power to shape international norms and behavior. The US has successfully used its constitutive power before, establishing the international norm of access to the global commons with the Marshall Plan in 1948. Now, the United States can use its strong co-optive power to reshape the rising China narrative and contribute to their cooperative security.

Co-optive power is the ability to get others to want what you want; this version of soft power helps America build international consensus, credibility, and legitimacy in the international community. While the United States has historically used its co-optive power to promote the spread of democracy, with China the United States must tailor its cooperative security goals and establish a partnership with a nondemocratic government. Attempting to mold China into a liberal democracy is futile and given the domestic legitimacy of the leading Party and its commitment to capitalist authoritarianism, it will likely lead to conflict. This does not mean, however, that the United States cannot maintain a peaceful co-existence with China. The United States’ use of its allies, influence, and co-optive power to establish and enforce acceptable institutionalized behavior for China provides a path for a China that retains its unique identity and abides by internationally normalized behaviors.¹¹ Cooperation in space exploration would encourage the development of shared goals and build China’s acceptance of international norms, particularly in the realm of global access to the commons and intellectual property. If China accepts the idea of unrestricted access to common domains and respects intellectual property rights, then there is hope for avoiding a future great power conflict through “keeping the international system open and free.”¹²

This said, while the constructivist approach and a cooperative security strategy provide an optimistic path toward a peaceful US-Sino relationship, the United States must also maintain a strategy of selective engagement to underwrite its continued great power status, protect core interests in Asia, and hedge against uncertainty.

While there is reason for optimism regarding future US-Sino relations, the United States must pursue objectives that maintain the institutionalized, coop-
erative aspects of its power, influence, and security. If the American identity as a benevolent superpower erodes, then it will lose its constitutive power, thus undermining the effectiveness of its cooperative strategy. Through selective engagement, the United States must maintain robust military forces in the Indo-Pacific region and continue to pursue means to counter China’s antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) capability. The United States must attempt to foster a China that recognizes institutionally accepted behavior, but it must also “retain the military strength to deter China from making a violent bid for dominance in Asia.” This strategy of selective engagement fulfills two purposes. First, it provides a margin for the United States should China’s intentions prove revisionist, that is, if China is bent on overturning the existing system rather than negotiating new roles within it. A constructivist approach provides the opportunity to influence future norms and behaviors, but it is susceptible to deception and changing intentions. Second, it assures American allies and partners and maintains the US identity as a superpower. A strategy of cooperative security underwritten with selective engagement provides the US with an opportunity to change the narrative for a rising China.

To avoid a future war, it is time that America creates a new narrative on its relationship with a resurgent China. One key area to start constructing this narrative is with space exploration. For all human history, great powers have explored ways to push the boundaries of human existence; modern great powers are now exploring space. Deep space exploration does not directly enhance state security; it is an objective that states pursue, in part, to promote their image as a great power.

The Wolf Amendment currently prohibits the United States from cooperating with China in space. This amendment has not deterred China from expanding its capability and influence in space and has only created further consternation between the two nations. Repealing the Wolf Amendment and seeking collaboration with China for deep space exploration would allow the United States to open a dialogue with China and start constructing a new narrative. Collaboration with China in space also presents an opportunity to avoid a space arms race and change the narrative that led to WWI when Germany entered a naval arms race with Great Britain. This strategic narrative would accept that China is a great power and, along with the United States, the two great powers are building a better future for mankind through space exploration. By pursuing joint space exploration, the United States has an opportunity to foster China’s identity as a great power in a way that does not directly impact the national security of either nation. This option allows the United States to pursue a grand strategy of cooperative security and selective engagement while capitalizing on its constitutive power to regulate China’s behavior.
The United States has an opportunity to use its constitutive power, along with a hybrid strategy of cooperative security and selective engagement, to meet the challenge of a rising China. America must repeal the Wolf Amendment and change the narrative that Xi’s China is analogous to Wilhelm I’s Germany. From there, the United States must leverage joint space exploration to foster China’s desired identity. Using its significant co-optive power, vast network of allies, and a strong military, the US must incentivize China to behave as a responsible regional power and to counter China’s A2/AD aspirations. Space might hold the key to recognizing China as a great power without the United States losing its identity, regional hegemony, and avoiding a great power conflict.

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Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Lt Col Nicole Klingensmith, Maj Jannel Black, Maj Jeffrey Spinney, and Maj Roni Yadlin for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. All errors found herein are my own.

Notes

1. “Constructivism” (lecture, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, AL, 23 November 2020).
2. “Constructivism” lecture.
4. “Constructivism” lecture.
5. Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” 3.